

Roald Dahl: *An Imagination Unleashed*

“And above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don’t believe in magic will never find it.” (Dahl) Author, Roald Dahl, brought to life several remarkable characters in his nineteen children’s novels. He created characters that made lasting impressions and influenced many children. One can easily recall the wit of Matilda Wormwood or the nurturing manner of Jennifer Honey from the novel, Matilda or the kooky nature of Willy Wonka and the hard working Oompa-Loompas? Dahl’s children’s novels, all unique and magnificent, led his readers into an imaginary world where special powers existed and chocolate was everywhere.

Roald Dahl was born in Llandaff, England, on September 13, 1916 to Norwegian parents. Dahl’s father passed away when he was just four years old leaving his mother to care for him and his four sisters. Following the request of her late husband, Mrs. Dahl sent young Dahl to English private schools and, although he had the opportunity to continue his studies at Oxford or Cambridge University, he elected to pursue a more adventurous path.

Dahl decided to go to Tanzania and began working for the Shell Oil Company. Soon after, he enlisted in the Royal Air Force Training Center in Kenya and began learning how to serve as a World War II fighter pilot. He demonstrated heroism throughout his different flight missions against German Messerschmitt fighters and fought against incredible odds to make it back to his base. Unfortunately, he had an almost fatal plane crash which changed the course of his life. While flying over Egypt, he had to crash land his plane leaving him with serious brain, spinal and hip injuries. He managed to survive the crash by pulling himself out of the burning wreckage and seeking help in nearby Alexandria. After undergoing several surgeries, Dahl recuperated.

After his near death experience, Dahl was transferred to Washington, D.C., to serve as an assistant air attaché. It was there he began his career as a writer by publishing a short story in the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1943, he published his first children's book, The Gremlins with much success. Next, he continued writing short stories such as *Someone Like You* and *Kiss, Kiss*. In 1953, he met his first wife at a dinner in New York City, Academy-award winning actress, Patricia Neal. The couple had five children together. "Had I not had children of my own, I would have never written books for children, nor would I have been capable of doing so." (Dahl) The stories he invented for his children became the start of his career as a children's writer.

In 1961, he published James and the Giant Peach and won much acclaim. He continued to publish novels such as, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, The BFG, The Witches, and Matilda. Many of his most popular novels were transformed into films and most recently, in 2005, Johnny Depp starred in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, a remake to the original film from 1971. To this day, Dahl's novels are commonly read and are still quite popular amongst children. Despite their growing popularity, the public has made attacks regarding cruelty and racism in Dahl's portrayal of the different characters. For example, there was a claim of racial stereotyping with the Oompa-Loompa characters from the novel, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Dahl defended his publications and claimed that the key to his success in writing for children was battling *with them* against adults.

One battle that did not end well was Roald Dahl's marriage of thirty years to Patricia Neal. In 1965, she suffered three burst cerebral aneurysms while pregnant with her fifth child, Lucy. This left her unable to communicate or walk. After her rehabilitation, Neal and Dahl's turbulent marriage ended in 1983. Dahl remarried Felicity Crossland and the couple moved to Buckinghamshire, England. Dahl's life ended on November 23, 1990 in Oxford, England. However, his legacy as a writer of imaginative and creative children's novels lives on.

“I have a passion for teaching kids to become readers, to become comfortable with a book, not daunted. Books shouldn't be daunting, they should be funny, exciting and wonderful; and learning to be a reader gives a terrific advantage.” (Dahl) Through his stories, Dahl was able to transform the ordinary into extraordinary and invited all children to experience these unique journeys. In honor of his memory, *The Roald Dahl Museum and Story Centre* is open to the public in Buckinghamshire village, England. With interactive galleries and hands on story creation, the museum invites children throughout the year to use their imaginations and write freely.

With Roald Dahl day (September 13th), Broadway plays and feature films, the characters and stories continue to come to life and are interpreted as a source of joy and inspiration to many. Dahl's vivid, inventive imagination created these inspiring tales that children can relate to and grow up treasuring for a lifetime.

Work Cited

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